



BROWSE



George Bellows eds. by Charles Brock, et al. (review)

Ronald Paulson

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reviewed by:

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Ronald Paulson (bio)

Charles Brock, et al., eds., *George Bellows* (Prestel, 2012), 336 pp.

Who is George Bellows? Not to be confused with Saul Bellow. Who

remembers Bellows, the enfant terrible of American painting in the 1900s, the great rising star before his early death at forty-two in 1925? At his death there was a retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; but not much since. The first significant exhibition since 1992 (in LA) was at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, until November 2013, and then at the Metropolitan Museum, New York, until the spring, when it went, much abbreviated (but, alas, with WWI canvases included), to the Royal Academy, London.

Bellows's name probably elicits one image: *Stag at Sharkey's*, two boxers, two slabs of pale raw meat, overlapping (killing each other, as Bellows [End Page 585] put it). This painting is almost as iconic as Munch's *The Scream*, similarly an image of our times; it is probably more familiar than the other American Icons: Homer's *Gulf Stream*, Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, Whistler's *Mother*, Grant Wood's *American Gothic*, and any Pollock drip painting. (Had Bellows lived, by the time of Pollock he would have been only in his seventies.)

Bellows came to New York from Columbus, Ohio, in his early twenties, and studied under Robert Henri, the doyen of the so-called Ashcan School (John Sloan, George Luks, William Glackens). Henri's instruction to his students was to paint what you see, and across the street from the studio was a boxing club, where the then-illegal sport could be witnessed by joining.

As a model of painting what you see, Henri introduced his students to Spanish painting (Velasquez, Murillo, Goya), by way of Manet; Bellows's *Stag at Sharkey's* is Goya, with late Goyaesque brushwork and the central figures surrounded by the terrible witnesses that Goya employed in many of his paintings and prints: ultimately, undisguised, this was his *Ecce Homo* in Toledo. Bellows's composition draws, consciously or unconsciously, on the *Passion* tradition of *Ecce Homo* paintings, which showed the bloody body of Christ surrounded by jeering torturers and tormentors emerging from blackness. You can't make out the faces of the boxers; you see the spectators' grotesque faces. For Goya this still

signified transubstantiation, and something of the religious content informed his *desastres de la guerra* and carried over into his still life paintings of raw meat. In Bellows's paintings the leering spectators make the two boxers, whose nakedness would have carried the associations of the two Christian images of male nudity, Christ and St. Sebastian, seem both sacrificial and erotic. The spectators are also, of course, present in Bellows's *Stag at Sharkey's*—a further ironic play on atonement—betting on one or the other fighter, like the gambling soldiers at the foot of the cross.

Stag at Sharkey's was one of four scenes of boxers Bellows painted around 1907, when boxing was still illegal and often fought outside the Queensbury Rules. When he exhibited *Stag at Sharkey's* he hung it alongside a cityscape, *Pennsylvania Excavation*, making a pair: the one a brutal reduction of the human in a social setting, the other a ragged hole dug in the center of Manhattan to enable another kind of ironic transfiguring, the erection of Pennsylvania Station. He made three more excavation paintings, but the idea of excavation in Manhattan was probably most effectively conveyed in *River Rats*, a steep dirt cliff filling the picture space, at the bottom a fringe of boys swimming in the East River and at the top a city street: the subject dirt. The only comparable paintings I can recall are Goya's rendering of naked earth (in one, a dog's head protrudes) in the Quinta del Sordo paintings and other late works: all else peripheral to the dirt. Bellows is carrying Henri's exhortation to its symbolic conclusion, showing the reality under the veneer, polish, and civility of both 1900 New York society and the norms of style and expectations of polish and clarity [**End Page 586**] of the conventional...

A New Edition" casts Dennis less as biblical scholar than as an ethicist. The Bible also inflects "My Noah," in which the speaker imagines how his anti-government neighbor would fare in a deluge.

Dennis's title, *Another Reason*, suggests a dialogue or debate caught in mid-utterance. If the slow reading movement enables us to better appreciate books like this one, so too should the perennial vogue for applied philosophy, as exemplified in popular columns like Chuck Klosterman's *The Ethicist* or manuals like Colin McGinn's *Moral Liberty: Or How to Do the Right Thing*. Dennis's poems are about how we ought to live. Sometimes he reminds me of John Koethe, an emeritus professor of philosophy who also ponders the human condition and his own life from a mild suburban perch. But Koethe's long poems owe much to Wallace Stevens's rhapsodies, which sometimes seem intoxicated by their own solitariness. By contrast, Dennis is as intensely preoccupied by society as that ostensible solitary Thoreau, whose fondness for the word "neighbor" rings (as Stanley Cavell long ago pointed out) a series of searching charges on what that term might mean.

Quiet, wry, earnest, and sometimes merciless, Dennis's poems consider how to be a good neighbor, teacher, friend, and human being. Each poem can be seen as a quiet homily, some addressed to a personified quality (Taste or Reason), some expressed in an unmailed letter, but all aimed at the human community. Accordingly, Dennis deploys the second person with a confidence and appropriateness rare in contemporary poetry, where "you" is so often a lazy stand-in for "I." (In one moving poem, "you" isn't the reader but apparently the poet himself; the poem is spoken from beyond the grave by a man Dennis presumably tutored while he [the speaker] was in prison. Can Dennis never raise his voice, but nothing in his poems is lazy.) *Another Reason* isn't always easy reading; you need to be a little patient to be drawn in, and then you get a moral workout. More unbuttoned, more apparently sensuous, Harrison is also a serious poet. Both these guests at the party are well worth listening to.

—Rachel Hadas

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